

Worry in the Wetlands

It is a warm, humid day like most summer days in Louisiana. My mom and I are sunbathing on a large, smooth rock in the middle of the most gorgeous place on earth, my home. My home has been around for thousands of years. It's a place where you can find thousands of species of plant and animals. No matter where you go in my home, you find peace and happiness. In case you haven't yet guessed, my home is in the Louisiana wetlands outside New Orleans. My mom and I are natives to this land. We are American Alligators. At one time we were thought to be close to extinction, but thanks to laws put in place by humans, we are growing in number. This leads me to a story I wish to tell you about my home.

Thousands of years ago, my ancestors had a much larger home than we do now. I asked my mom about the proud history of my home. She told me that we used to roam on hundreds of miles of wetlands that are no longer around. I was told that more than a hundred and fifty years ago, humans began to settle on the beautiful rich farmlands along the banks of the Mississippi River. They built big, humongous homes and farmed the fields. They made a lot of money and didn't want to see it get washed away when the Mississippi River flooded every year. To keep this from happening, the humans built what they call "levees." It took us alligators quite some time to figure out what the big mounds of dirt along the river were for, but over time, we figured it out.

It took the humans even longer to figure things out. They continued to build levees. Each year the floods would come, but now the land next to the river remained dry. This meant that new soil was no longer being deposited along the banks of the river or on the wetlands. The soil was washed into the ocean instead. My mom told me that humans thought this was a good thing at first. It wasn't until years later that humans started catching onto the devastation they had created. By keeping the floods out of the area, there was no longer a way to put soil, washed away by rain and hurricanes, back on top of the land. So, the land started to sink in places. It sank under the water and disappeared. In some places, it became part of the Gulf of Mexico, which is salty, and not a place where my home, the wetlands, can survive.

Let me tell you another story. It's a terrifying story of a hurricane. We lived through it, that's how I know it was a nightmare I don't care to live again. My mom and I spent the day in August as we usually do, eating and swimming. It was a day with very dark clouds and high winds. It rained a lot but we didn't mind. It felt good on our skin. My ancestors lived through many hurricanes in the past. It's all part of life.

The next day and those for years to come is what makes my story a nightmare. Almost overnight my home changed drastically. Mom and I had no idea what was happening but we found ourselves moving to find a new home. When the New Orleans levees broke after the hurricane, the whole city flooded because wetlands that used to shield the city from strong storms, no longer existed. Not many expected this. We swam for a very long time outside the city trying to find another place to live. When the storm

stopped and the damage was seen by the world, we were long gone. What we found out many weeks later is that we were not the only creatures who had to move. Many humans also were forced to make a new home somewhere else.

Many months later Mom and I learned that the hurricane had destroyed 30 square miles of our beautiful home. Altogether Mom told me Louisiana has lost nearly 2,000 square miles of coastal wetlands in the past 70 years. That's the size of Delaware! If more wetlands had been there during the hurricane, the flooding and damage might not have been as bad.

My home is disappearing and I'm afraid that when my home finally disappears, so will Mom and I. To save the wetlands, humans must educate others about what is happening and what they can do to change it. They can also become volunteers. They can be involved in projects to include adding more soil to the wetlands and planting plants that hold water. Engineers can build floodgates that allow water to put more soil where it is needed. If humans can save the American Alligator why can't they also put their heads together to save my home so I have some place to live in another 50 years?

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